

THE TRADITIONAL MBAISE SOCIETY: PERSPECTIVES ON IGBO SCIO-CULTURAL HISTORY, 1500-1900

Paul Uche Mbakwe, Ph.D

Department of History and International Relations, Abia State University, P.M.B 2000,
Uturu, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT: *This article examines aspects of the socio-cultural institutions and practices in the context of traditional Mbaïse society and culture. The process of evolution and growth of Mbaïse society was predicated on a number of institutions and practices which had socio-cultural, political, economic and religious implications. Appreciating the fact that social development is a vast area in socio-cultural history, the paper concentrated on the family structure, marriage institutions, religious beliefs and practices. Traditional Mbaïse society was endowed with these great institutions and others which Christianity sought to wipe out, though without success. The impact of Christianity and other western influences notwithstanding, the paper argues that these institutions generated ideas, values, and norms which crystallized into the Mbaïse identity and cosmology. Against the backdrop of the popular opinion held by the western writers to the effect that pre-colonial African societies were not part of world history and civilization (and hence incapable of initiating change), we argue further that this negative and bias narrative about pre-colonial African societies is now very anachronistic and no longer worthy of intellectual attention by scholars of both African and European persuasions.*

KEYWORDS: Religion, Tradition, History, Mbaïse, Socio- Cultural, Africa, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the rich socio-cultural institutions and practices in the pre-colonial Mbaïse society. These institutions and practices gave order and meaning to their social, political, economic, religious, norms, values, as well as cosmological orientation. It is believed that as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, Mbaïse society presented a picture of a highly developed social and cultural traditions that were capable of sustaining the people. Socio-cultural development is a vast subject but it is proposed in this article to focus mainly on family structure, marriage institution, and religious beliefs and practices before the emergence of westernization. These aspects of social and cultural lives were not only widely regarded as fundamental but visibly significant in the evolution of Mbaïse as a political unit. No doubt, these institutions and others not covered in this paper must have helped to lay the foundation for her world view, value system, and eventual civilization.

Identification of the area of study

The wide ecological variegation of Igbo land and the influence of neighbouring non-Igbo peoples have galvanized different sections of the Igbo into evolving local variations of Igbo culture while at the same time retaining its basic ingredients. These local variations are evident in the multiplicity of dialects, in differences in social systems, political institutions, architecture, marriage and burial traditions. Ethnographers have therefore, after a general survey of these variations, divided Igbo language into five main cultural groups viz: northern,

southern, western, eastern and north-eastern Igbo (Afigbo, 1986:8) The Southern Igbo were further divided by ethnographers into four main sub-groups - the *Isu-orlu*, *Oratta-Ikwerre*, *Ohuhu-Ngwa* and *Isu-Item* (Afigbo, 1986: 11). Mbaïse, the focus of this study formed part of the *Ohuhu-Ngwa* sub-section of the southern Igbo located within the extensive deciduous forest belt of West Africa. Mbaïse is located within the present Imo state of Nigeria. It is situated within latitude 5-6 degrees north of the equator and longitude 7-8 degrees east of the Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). Mbaïse falls within the *Orlu* section of the *Awka - Orlu* uplands with a land area of 404 square kilometers and with an official population of 304,338 as at 1991 census (Njoku, 1985: 12). The area is predominately a table land except for the towns of Akabo and some parts of Ezinihitte closer to the Oramiri – Ukwa and Imo rivers respectively, with medium range hills and small valleys. The area also falls into the equatorial rain – forest region characterized by thick vegetation, although much of this has been destroyed as a result of population pressures. The area is also virtually without rivers and streams except the border towns of Akabo and parts of Ezinihitte watered by *Oramiri-Ukwa* and Imo Rivers respectively. In fact, over eighty-five percent of the area is without rivers (smock, 1971:75). As part of southern Nigeria, Mbaïse is influenced by rain-bearing south – west monsoon winds characterized by long rainy season; with heaviest rain experienced between July and September. A short spell of harmattan is noticed intermittently in December and intensifying in January, with dry season spanning from November to March.

Mbaïse is an artificial creation called forth by the exigencies of colonial administration. In other words, Mbaïse has no common putative founder and therefore lacks a common traditional mythology. In the words of Nwala, ‘the coming together of all the kinship groups under a common political umbrella and administrative unit was secured in 1941’ (Nwala, 1978:18). Mbaïse is therefore a conglomeration of five kinship groups with different migratory routes and who probably had cultures of separate but peaceful coexistence. The name ‘Mbaïse’ was proposed by Mbaïse pioneer politicians like Joseph Iwunna, Dennis Abii, Pius Nwoga and others, in a meeting of chiefs of the area presided over by the then District Officer, Mr. L. E. Chadwick (Njoku, 2003:20). This implies that the name Mbaïse was formed by the people and adopted by the colonial officers. In essence, the ‘artificial’ nature of Mbaïse is evidenced by the diverse dialectical, cultural and kinship groups to which the component parts belong. But today, Mbaïse has no doubt, acquired over the years, a sense of common identity especially in terms of culture and worldview and can now be seen as a political unit.

It has to be emphasized that the groups that constituted Mbaïse had a long history of cooperation before the period of colonial administration. Village and village- groups that formed Mbaïse had socio-economic and cultural relations among themselves. It is believed that from the earliest times, the people inter-married as village groups and clans from one part took wives from the clans or villages on the other side of the land. Periodic markets at Umuokirika, Ihitteafoukwa, Mpam, Ogbe and Nguru were attended by people from Mbutu, Okeuvuru, Amumara, Enyigugu and so on. Economically strategic and periodic markets like Nkwo-Lagwa, Afor-Enyigugu, Afo-Oru, Afor-ogbe, Nkwo-Ala, Eke-Nguru and others were popular markets in Mbaïse prior to the establishment of colonial rule (Ohanele, Oral Information). The communities spoke mutually intelligible dialect which distinguished the people wherever they found themselves. Today in Nigeria, no matter the area one comes from among the five clans, people would easily recognize him as an Mbaïse through his dialect. This and other evidences authentically reveal the oneness of the communities that later became Mbaïse.

The oneness and unity of Mbaise before colonial administration was demonstrated by the alleged involvement of almost all the communities in the death of Dr. Rogers Stewart, a medical officer that served during the British expedition against the Arochukwu ‘oracle’ in 1902. It was reported that the body of Dr. Stewart was shared among several communities in the area. As the British reprisal force patrolled round the various communities from the north to the south, there was hardly any community in Mbaise that did not suffer terribly in the hands of the reprisal forces (Ekechi, 1989:41).

The history of Mbaise demonstrates the contingent nature of ethnic identity. Ethnic units among the Igbo traditionally were associated with a geographical area. Hence, when contiguous areas are united to undertake activities, they often develop a new communal identity. This communal identity is still possible when the established units are divided to form separate local councils or constituencies (smock, 1971:76). This is exactly how Mbaise acquired a common identity since the over sixty years that it has existed as a political unit. The people have been subjected to a uniform administration, offered the same opportunities, and faced many similar problems. The common cultural identity of the area has been enhanced by Christianization, self- help economic development projects, as well as political activities. More importantly, increased mobility within Mbaise, facilitated by inter-connection of rural roads and inter-marriage between groups, have helped to unify the people.

Conceptual framework

The term “social history” needs to be clarified in this paper. This is necessary in the sense that social action is very difficult and too general to define as an academic genre. We shall not go into the various debates and views of various scholars and authorities in the field on this matter, but we must lean on what seems to be a popular view that as a pedagogic enthusiasm, and as an academic practice, ‘social history’ refers to a sub discipline of the historical sciences that focuses on society at large. It derives its vitality from its oppositional character, as it concerned mainly with ‘real life’ rather than abstractions; with ‘ordinary’ people rather than privileged elites, with everyday things rather than sensational events(Bowlby,2001:4289-4291).Simply put, social history concentrates upon the social, economic and cultural institutions of a people. Social history distinguishes itself from political history, which had dominated historical scholarship both in Europe and Africa until recently.

The ‘social’ in social history meant dealing with the structures of societies and social changes, groups and classes, ways of life, families, households, local communities ethnic groups, etc. Social history therefore challenged dominant historical narratives which were constructed around the history of politics and the state or around history of ideas by stressing social change as core dimension around which historical synthesis and diagnosis of the contemporary world should be organized (Bowlby, 4291).Cultural antecedents refer to the sum total of human behavioural patterns and technological innovations communicated from one generation to another. The culture of the people in this respect implies the patterns of behavior exhibited from generation to generation (Solanke, (1982:29). It is the totality of the ideas, concepts and values that characterize the society. The Mbaise socio-cultural elements are manifested in their literature (oral or written),religions,arts,birth, age grade system, marriage, death rituals, use of language, dance, music forms, as well as their attire, food habits, festivals, storytelling, superstitions, wrestling contests, medicine men, oracles and even slavery. Culture as it were, is not static as it is often modified to suit particular era or generation.

Rationale and significance of the study

The justification for this study lies in the fact that it addresses a seemingly neglected but important area in historical studies: social history. Writing recently on the importance of this sub discipline of historical scholarship, Finley states that:

There is a great need for a serious attention to the socio-economic history of the people. Social developments have more meaning for us and touches our lives more directly than any other aspect of our past. In the age of seeking 'relevance', nothing is more relevant than the social and economic history of a people. By studying the social life of an earlier age, we can gain an understanding of others, in whatever time and place they lived (See Mbakwe, 2005:65).

Furthermore, this research is also significant when it is appreciated that at the moment, there is no documented account of the pre-colonial social and economic developments by a professional historian in this popular Igbo polity. Existing historical documents in the area, though valuable, focused more on political history especially in the colonial period. There is therefore a deliberate shift of attention in this present study to socio-cultural history. It is also important to state that in this era of western influences, there is the tendency to de-emphasize issues relating to traditional history and culture as contemporary writers often see these as old peoples' business. This may help to explain the rationale behind the stress by the *Ohaneze ndi Igbo*, a pan-Igbo socio-cultural organization, of the compelling need to preserve the peoples' socio-cultural history in order to consciously revitalize the Igbo cultural values, ethnic identity and cosmological orientation. The *Ahiajoku* lectures and its colloquia have contributed a lot in the effort to raise the Igbo national identity and socio-cultural civilization and consciousness. The choice of the baseline '1500' is hinged on a finding in another study by the present researcher that the first migrants that founded what is today Mbaise arrived about the year 1500 (See Mbakwe, 2005: 68). The terminal date '1900' is the official date of commencement of colonialism in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The writing of social history of a pre-colonial Igbo society such as Mbaise requires an interdisciplinary approach. In this direction, oral sources, archival materials, written records, ethnographic data and other sources relevant for historical reconstruction were utilized. To the best of the writer's knowledge, there is not yet an archaeological discovery in any part of the areas that came together to form what is now Mbaise, therefore, this source of historical information may not constitute a source of data for the reconstruction of the peoples' socio-cultural history. Oral sources were derived from individual and group interviews of knowledgeable informants of Igbo history in general and Mbaise socio-cultural history in particular. Our readers must note that there is no mention of the name 'Mbaise' in the European records available in the national archive at Enugu. What we have in the archives are the names of the five clans-*Agbaja*, *Okeuvuru*, *Ahiara*, *Ekwerazu* and *Ezinihitte*, that had existed as separate political entities before the 1941 amalgamation.

Family structure and marriage institution

The family in Igbo culture is often referred to as *ezi-na-ulo*. This comprises the husband, wife or wives, and children. In a broader connotation, it is an extended family of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and finally the lineage. Among the Igbo, the family was the basic unit of the social organization. The family hierarchy of the immediate family, the extended family and the lineage were the pivots around which most social activities revolved. The village apparently had an insignificant place in the Igbo socio-cultural system.

In the traditional Mbaïse society, the concept of family as a social institution was viewed from the perspective of extendedness and not the modern day nuclear family unit. Thus, a man, his wife or wives and children as social unit, did not in themselves constitute a family. Rather, the family was a functional amalgam of several such social units. The basis for family solidarity was predicated on common ancestral affinity. The descent of all members therefore could be traced within the context of a common genealogical tree. All members of the family were therefore bound by chords of consanguinity with their roots traceable to a common ancestral figure who was usually a man (see Mbakwe, 2005:261)). This was so because Mbaïse society was structurally patrilineal: made up of the descendants in the male line, of a founder ancestor by whose name the lineage was called (Meek, 1932, NAE 19981/CSE/85/5056).

The oldest male in the combined nuclear families was the head (the *opara*). The *okpara* or *opara* was highly revered by all other members of the family by virtue of his age and for possessing the family *ofò* stick; the symbol of religions, moral and political authority. The *opara* was therefore “adjudged a sage who was profoundly knowledgeable in the affairs of society and a potent conduit through which the wishes and directives of the ancestors were communicated to the living” (Uchendu, 1965). It was at the family level that the ancestral veneration and invocation of the spirits of the ancestors were widely performed. The *opara* presided over the periodic family meetings usually held at his court (*obi*), and gave verdict on all family matters including marriage, divorce, and land allocation. He was at the head in the settlement of intra and inter family disputes. Such decisions as reached at family meetings automatically became binding on all members. The title *opara*, it should be noted, carried with it the aura of political authority in all the five clans in the pre-colonial Mbaïse (Meek, 1932 NAE). Uchendu lends credence to this authority accorded the *Okpara*. In his words: “all the households and their dependents recognize the authority of the compound head, and would not make a major political decision without first consulting him” (Uchendu, 1965:15).

The family heads also occasionally met as council of elders to deliberate on issues that bordered on the general welfare of the entire village group. Over time, it was from the village group that they chose one of their members to serve as a village head (Idagu, 2003). The village group (*Obodo*) was in most cases the highest social unit and centre of the modern forms of development and cooperative activities (Uchendu, 19). The village group was therefore composed of an aggregate of villages which believed itself to be the descendants of a common ancestor; usually of “divine origin” and in some case, a “mystical kinship” which was believed to have founded the village group (Hammond, 1964:20).

In the traditional Mbaïse society, the descendants of the common ancestor usually “his sons” were considered the founders of the different villages that composed the village group. The village group was united to a central deity or ‘ark’ recognized by all members of the village group. The deity was the symbol of strength and unity of all members of the village group. It should be remarked that the “village”, more often than not, was mainly a geographical unit

providing some considerable solidarity based on neighborhood rather than on immediate “blood relationship”. This probably explains as has already been pointed out why the ‘village’ had an insignificant place in the Igbo socio-cultural concern.

Marriage in pre-colonial Mbaise society was regulated by laws (unwritten) and by social restrictions which define those who can marry, where and who they can marry, the conditions as well as the rights and obligations of the husband and wife including property rights and inheritance. Marriage was traditionally a highly respected institution and as such an indispensable function required of every adult that has passed through the age of puberty (Ezeji Elders of Nguru, Group oral Information). The culture of Mbaise people and indeed that of all Igbo people never allowed celibacy as this was viewed as contrary to the law of society and nature. Marriage was not allowed between relatives and every effort was made to ensure that intending couples share no biological kinship ties (Anosike, oral Information).

A young man of marriageable age was not meant to choose a wife for himself in the pre-colonial times. The father would find a girl from a respectable and hard-working family. The father would initiate discussions with the girl’s family before contacting his son. For the girl, the choice of her father was also her choice. Once the two parents agreed, the father of the young man would carry wine to the family of the girl. In a situation where the young man found the girl himself, his family would carry out investigation about the family background of the girl. The aim of these secret investigations was to find out if the family of the girl had any hereditary diseases such as epilepsy or insanity or any other kind of hereditary sicknesses or bad conduct (Adner, Interim Report..., NAE, 1952).

It was also intended to find out whether the girl had good moral behaviour, sense of duty, intelligence and ability to work with minimum supervision. Similar enquires were also carried out about the young man’s family background before consent could be given an agreement reached. If both parents were satisfied, the girl’s father would send words to the family of the young man. His father would carry wine in the company of one or two other persons to the girl’s father to initiate negotiations (Meek, Intelligence Report... (1932). He describes the situation succinctly thus; “when a young man attains the age of puberty or wishes to be betrothed to a girl, he approaches her parents or guardian with a presents of palm wine”. The initial palm wine brought to the parents of the girl is called “*Mmanya Ajuju*”. The acceptance of the initial wine by the girl’s parents was an indication that marriage proposal had been accepted and this consequently led to a period of engagement. During the period of engagement, the suitor was required by tradition to work once in a while in the farms of his prospective father-in-law during farming seasons. In working the farms of his prospective father-in-law, a suitor could solicit the help of his close friends or members of his age set. This was done in order to test his strength and devotion to the intended bride. The young man could in the alternative to working in the prospective father-in-law’s farms, present money for use in the hiring of farm labourers. (Meek, Intelligence Reports...).

After the period of engagement; which usually lasted between three months and one year depending on individuals, the girl was put in the fattening room called “*Irumbede*”. The significance of this was to prepare the girl in order to be able to face married life. In the fattening room, she was always smeared with camwood (*Uhie*) and white chalk (*Nzu*). These traditional cosmetics were used on her body in order to smoothen her body which would enhance her beauty and make her more attractive in the eyes of her prospective husband. A girl was required to stay between three months and one year in the fattening room depending on how wealthy the prospective groom was, for he had to pay for all the expenses accrued in

the process. In the fattening room, the bride-to-be was properly cared for and she enjoyed delicious meals and was also made to eat heavily. She was never allowed to perform any hard work. There were always attendants hovering around her and some of them taught her to sing and dance to traditional tunes (Inechi, oral information).

All these preferential treatments were given to her in order to make her happy and also to increase her weight. Then, it was believed that the fatter a lady is, the more attractive she would appear especially to her husband. In the fattening room, the bride-to-be was also made to undergo some lessons on home management. These lessons were usually delivered by the elderly women in her family. She was also taught how to carry out various household chores such as cooking, sweeping, and general cleaning of the house. She was also taught how a woman is supposed to behave in her husband's house and in the society. She was for instance, explicitly instructed on how to discuss with her husband or elders in her family in a respectable manner (Fortes, 1972:12).

The fattening room system would be said to have helped a lot in the sustenance of marriages in the traditional Mbaïse society. This was essentially because before a girl went to her husband's household, she would have acquired the basic training that would help her to face the challenges of married life. This may have informed the comment by an informant that; "in those days when the fattening room system was properly practiced, there were fewer cases of divorce and marital breakdown." (Mbakwe, oral Information). On leaving the fattening room, a girl was expected to move into the husband's household. But before this, the marriage rites and ceremonies would have been completed.

The settlement of customary requirements was divided into three stages: that of the men folk called "*Aku amala*"; that of the women folk called "*Ibu efere*"; and that of the girl's parents called "*The nne- na- nna nwa*". In the pre-colonial Mbaïse, the requirements of '*amala*' were simple – jars of palm wine, kolanuts, heads of tobacco (*isi anwuru*) and a token sum of money. It was strongly believed that "one person does not own a child". However, before '*amala*' would demand these items, they would have ensured that their daughter had given an "unshakeable" consent. This was ascertained by giving her a cup full of palm wine to drink part and give the rest to the intended husband. As soon as the girl carried out this ritual, her consent was then confirmed. This was followed by the negotiation between the two groups of the bride price having been assured that the girl's parents had received their due rites from their prospective father-in-law (Dioka, 1994: 13).

The bride price, which Ilogu purposely called 'bride-wealth' (because no 'price' was ever fixed) was sometimes exclusive for the father and whatever was paid was usually accompanied by a goat (Ilogu, 1974:28). The goat, called "*eghu amala*" was usually killed and shared among the adult males in the village as soon as all the traditional marriage ceremonies and marital rites were completed. The significance of the killing of a goat to mark the end of marriage rituals is aptly captured as follows: 'If one marries from another community, a bond of fraternity exists between the two communities. It is not permitted for a quarrel that will let the unjustified drop of the other's blood on the soil of the other community' (Maduagwu, et.al, 2013:5). That is the essence of the goat (*Ewu Igbandu*) killed and shared during the traditional marriage involving children of two communities. It is a social covenant to share, protect, and defend and to do no evil to one another. It is captured in the saying, "*ogomadu bu nwanneya*": one's in law is his/her brother or sister (Maduagwu et.al, 6). This was one of the ways traditional Mbaïse derived her values.

In the pre-colonial Mbaise, before the introduction of British money, bride price was paid with goats or yams and later, cowries were used. (Dioka, 15). In some cases, the bride price was paid in the form of services rendered by the suitor to his prospective father-in-law. The principle of service for bride price was not peculiar to pre-colonial Mbaise society. Among the Jews for instance, Jacob served his father-in-law for seven years before he obtained his wife (See Mbakwe, 2007:56). When payment was made, it was done usually through a middle man. It is important to note that the middleman or "*onye aka ebe*" was usually a person known to both parties through whom the bride groom and his kinsmen handed over the customary requirements to the parents of the girl. In case of divorce, or the marriage could no longer hold, the bride price was usually returned through the middleman. The girl was then released from the marriage and could then re-marry (Agulanna, 1999:125-142). It is necessary to observe that the young woman was usually handed over to the middleman who in turn, handed her over to the eldest man in her husband's compound. This guaranteed that the young woman was well treated and respected knowing that her parents could take her back if she was maltreated. However, the termination of marriage through divorce was highly discouraged in the pre-colonial Mbaise society. Divorce may mean the return of all or part of the bride wealth. Bareness, adultery and theft were often sufficient grounds for declaring a marriage null and void (Shockley, Intelligence Reports...EP8840A, MINLOC 6/1/175 NAE, 1931).

A husband who had dissolved his marriage made an immediate request to the wife's parents to refund his bride price, and if they failed to reply within a reasonable time, he took the first opportunity of capturing a member of their family and selling him (or her) as a slave (Meek, 51). Against the backdrop of what obtains today, the courts did not insist on a refund of the bride price until the divorced woman re-married. This is not fair enough as the girl's parents may not meet up with the liability of returning the monies paid as bride price by the former husband of the woman. Where the refund is expected, the former husband, may have to wait a long time before he receives the money which will enable him to re-marry, more especially as, "many divorced wives now prefer harlotry to re-marriage" (Oriaku, Oral Information). Marriage as an institutionalized social relationship was very significant in traditional Mbaise society because of its contributions to the socialization process in the society. Marriage linked two families together in a kind of 'brotherly relationship' when a boy and a girl from these two families get married' (Ilogu, 29). Together with the many customs associated with it, the marriage institution brought many families together as a united force that was necessary for traditional societal development and the much cherished family values. Indeed, it was another avenue through which an individual shares in the group life in Igbo societies.

Traditional Religion and worship

African traditional religion is one of the most maligned and misunderstood aspects of African culture. It has endured all sorts of derogatory epithets and nomenclatures assigned by western commentators and writers who were ignorant of its true nature (Dopamu and Awolalu, 1979:13-24). The truth is that, to the objective mind, African traditional religion shares a lot that are similar to the tenets of Islam and Christianity, the two religions whose protagonists have largely been responsible for denigrating it. Religion is a universal culture deriving essentially from man's understanding that 'he is not his own guide, judge, or ultimate authority' (Noah, 1978:104). This belief is predicated on man's encounter with the universe and its different and inexplicable challenges and mysteries resulting in him, a sense of apparent helplessness in the face of numerous awesome a phenomenon, and the consequent need to put the universal forces

in harness for his safety and survival. It has been argued that this is no longer absolutely true of Christianity and Islam as it is of African religion (Amadi, 1982:204).

In Mbaise, traditional religion had followed in broad outline the concepts and practices of religion in African societies in general. Secondly, probably for the reasons that African religion is complex and coupled with the absence of any putative founder, it had not been possible to attach a single classificatory name to it in Mbaise as was the case in other African societies. Of course, deriving a single name is made more difficult because of divergences not only of local deities but of detailed religious practices. In the words of Amadi, 'if a single name can ever be applied to African religion no such name can go beyond a territorial unit that comprises a religious and cultural unity...' (Amadi, 205). The fact is that the perception of the true nature of African traditional religion can only be understood through its structure. Idowu says that 'there are in reality five component elements that go into making of African traditional religion. These are belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, each with its own consequent attendant cult' (Idowu, 1973 :139).

In Mbaise, as among all Igbo, the principal God is call 'chukwu' or 'Chineke' – meaning “the great God” or ‘the Creator God’. The central association in the concept of the principal god is the belief in a supreme source of beneficial creation. The great god – chukwu is believed to be the author of heaven and earth who makes animals and plants grow. As the source of human life, he gives to each man at the time of his birth, his particular portion of the divine being called Chi _ (Ilogu, 1974:68-75). The belief of the people in life after death was portrayed in the system of burying the dead especially great and titled men in the traditional Igbo society. On the death of an Eze or Nze, or any great man, some of his property were buried along with him. These property included such things as his cutlass, snuff – box, dishes, sleeping mats, drinking cups, pots of palm wine and clothing. Blood of animals such as goats and sheep were also sprinkled into the grave. Sometimes, human heads, particularly those of slaves were buried along with the dead man (Ejekwumadu, oral Information). The significance of this practice lies in the belief that the dead man would make use of these items buried along with him in the “world to come”.

Traditional Mbaise people like other Igbo groups believed in the existence of pantheons of gods: Anyanwu (the sun god), Igwe (the sky god), Amadioha (the god of thunder and lightning), and the Ala (the earth goddess). The worship of Anyanwu was carried out by the erection of cult symbols of a plant with an earthen bowl placed at the base of the plant. Sometimes the sun god was worshipped and addressed in prayer as if he were the same as Chineke. At other times, he was regarded as the messenger of the great creator, god (Chineke), through whom “fowl sacrifice” tied on top of a long bamboo poles would reach chineke. Prayers and sacrifices were also offered to the sun god when these are required by the diviner for special purposes. For example, during a severe illness in which the sick person’s breath is feared to be high and fast, the sun god is prayed to make the “heart beat normal”. Igwe, the sky god is the husband of Ala, who sends rain to moisten the soil so as to be productive. Not much worship was offered to this god as he was often better known through his “wife”, the earth goddess, who happens to be the most important of these four gods of Igbo religion and life (Ilogu, 1974:70).

Amadioha, the god of thunder and lightning was prominently revered by traditional Mbaise society. He was regarded as the wrathful messenger of the supreme god, Chineke, who sends it in the form of thunder to punish evildoers. Hence, oaths were sworn by him and “priests” can curse suspected persons by him. It is strongly believed among the people that Amadioha is not a beneficent god to whom various sacrifices are offered; rather occasional public

appeasements are ordered by diviners so as to ward off impending doom from his wrath (Ilogu, 69). *Ala*, the earth goddess, is the most important deity in traditional Igbo society. She is the guardian of morality, the controller of the minor gods of fortune and economic life. It is she who works in conjunction with the spirits of dead ancestors to order the prohibitions and the ritual avoidances. Many social offences become *Aru* or pollution or abomination because they infringe on the laws of the earth goddess. Because of her importance in ensuring health, agricultural fortune and other successes, she is well known all over Igbo land (Ilogu, 1974 :66). Most public worships of various communities in traditional Mbaise are offered to the earth goddess as well as seasonal celebrations which relate to the various planting seasons of the year. Her shrines are still found in most homes and public squares of many villages in the present Mbaise society.

Next in the rank of these pantheons of gods are innumerable minor deities which are sometimes personifications of the facts and features of nature and of daily life. Prominent among these minor gods are *Ahiajoku* – the god of farm work; *Agwu-ishi* – the god of divination and herbal medicine; and *Ndiche* – deified spirit of dead ancestors; *Ikenga* – the god of adventure in hunting or business enterprise, or the cult of success symbolized in the right hand. The cult has a ritual object in the nature of a carved wooden image of a human being, usually carrying a sword in one hand, and also known as *ike Ikenga nga*. A successful man was believed to have an active *ikenga* and vice versa. Ritual objects at the *Mbari* alter could be seen clearly to imply the ability of the deity to revitalize a waning personal *ikenga* or sustain an active one. It was a common sight to see *ikenga* objects in the various deities and shrines in the communities and clans in Mbaise. The priests of the various deities were always there to offer prayers on behalf of any devotee who had come to pay homage for thanksgiving or a petition. According to one of my informants, most deities could be approached for diverse objectives: for health, for wealth, for children, for protection, and so on. If a devotee considered a particular divinity as capable of solving his problems, he would first of all consult the priest or a diviner as the case might be who would decide what the deity needed for sacrifice. The sacrifice usually needed are: four kola-nuts, one bottle of hot drink, four tubers of yam, and a cock (Akakwam, oral Information).

In the case of the *Mbari* deity, the priest took powdered chalk from a wooden bowl and sprinkled some of it on the inner recesses of the alter that contained an ‘*ikenga-like*’ objects, and began to pray asking the deity to hearken to the pleas of the devotee and grant him his heart desires or request. The devotees were usually asked to perform certain duties connected to the ritual such as untying of the cock and sharing part of the kola-nuts he brought for the sacrifice: to show his unshakable commitment to what was done during the ritual. Most deities in Igbo land could be approached for expiation, propitiation, petition, and thanksgiving.

There were also tree gods, like *Akpu*, *Orji*, and *Ugba*. These gods had their cult symbols in public squares as well as in private homes, but some like *Ahiajoku*, receive much public sacrifice and command community worship with big celebrations at seed planting time and at harvest. This is what is celebrated during festivals like *Itu- aka*, *Iriji*, (new yam festival) and *Ekpe* festivals in Mbaise even today. These festivals nevertheless are not only popular among the Mbaise but also popular among other Igbo groups especially in the Southeast area of Nigeria. Among the groups of spirit-gods mentioned earlier, *Ndiche* is the most prominent in Mbaise because it is the deified spirit of dead ancestors. What makes *Ndiche* a prominent feature of Mbaise religious life is the belief that the dead ancestors are invisible members of the community. This spirit worked jointly with *Ala* (the earth goddess) in protecting the

community from harm in the form of famine or epidemics like small pox or abominations like the birth of children with a tooth or the birth of twins (Agulanna, 1999:130).

It is very important to point out here that the very important feature of Mbaise social structure described earlier as the lineage is religiously upheld by the ancestor cult. People who trace their origin to a common ancestor must keep together and help one another or else incur the displeasure of this ancestral spirit. It is believed that though these ancestors are dead, they still observe very accurately the activities of the living than the living themselves. As spirit gods in the underworld, they share more fully in the Omni-presence of *chukwu* and his messenger, the goddess of morality. An important and distinct feature of Mbaise traditional religion is the custom of building at periodic intervals elaborate structures known as "*Mbari*" "in honour of the gods". These structures have the appearance of temples but can hardly be described as such, as they have a temporary significance only and are allowed to crumble into decay soon after being built. The skill and labour expended in building them are a public exhibition of the gratitude to the gods for the benefits conferred "by them" on the community (Parrinder, 1976:27).

The relationship between man and the spirit world is maintained through many channels. Obedience to the "approved" codes of behaviour and the customs (Omenela) are enforced by the earth goddess through priests and titled elders and the heads of various extended families, is the most important channel. To the Mbaise, therefore, the spirit world is very real and intimate. Hence, the belief in the existence of spirits in all aspects of nature. *Chineke*, the supreme and creator god is believed to be so important and so remote that he allows a great many minor gods and spirits to intervene in the daily affairs of men thereby providing the intimate relationship between the seen world of men and the unseen world of gods and spirits. A good number of scholars have argued that in effect these minor gods are worshipped, prayed and feared to the exclusion of the supreme god, while a new crop of researchers and writers are saying that these minor gods are mere intermediaries. These they say, is like the concept of the pluralism in the god head which in the Christian faith is expressed in the doctrine of the trinity (Amadi, 1999: 65).

Magic and medicine were very important ingredients of Mbaise traditional religion. It is believed that the organic unity between magic and religion is very strong and an ancient one. The difference between the two in simple language is that while the latter operates on the principles of submission, the former operates on those of coercion. In religion, man submits himself to the will of the deity while in magic, he tries to subject the deity and other elemental beings to his will (Amadi, 1999:64). Lending credence to the above assertion, Parrinder argues that:

The African magician believes that there are vital forces or spiritual powers that he can tap. His work is not merely mechanical, but dependent upon spiritual belief. Hence magic can properly be said to come within the scope of religion. It is sometimes said that magic commands, religion implores, because in the higher forms of religion men have to do with ultimate powers whose will is independent of and greater than man's...(Parrinder 1976:26-32).

The forces so called forth by the magician could be put to good or evil use depending on the purpose of the magic. In Mbaise, the *dibia* (the traditional medicine man) and sorcerers were those usually versed in the art of magic whose charms they also sold to interested clients. Magic, whether homeopathic, sympathetic, or contagious, was usually applied to interpersonal

and other inter-group relationships such as during conflicts and wars. For instance, it was reported that the people of Ahiara rendered themselves bullet – proof as a result of powerful charms possessed by them during the Ahiara punitive expedition in 1901-2 (Onyekwere, oral Information). Magic as well as religion was linked to the traditional medicinal practice. In many African societies, magic and medicine go by the same name. In the case of Mbaise and the other Igbo groups, today, they are both referred to as Ogwu. Whatever is the case, magic and traditional medicine possess religious implications.

The belief in the re-incarnation is another important component of the Igbo traditional religion. Also important is the belief in ancestor worship. These are anchored on the belief in the continuity of life. It is important to note that the presence of ancestors whose blessing and protection was highly cherished was called through the pouring of libation: during all significant occasions ranging from marriage ceremonies, wars, commercial activities and socio-cultural festivals. The significance of this practice and belief in ancestral veneration in traditional Africa was captured by Okon E.Uya thus:

The conception of reality of the African is that there really is no past, no present and no future. There is continuing stream of reality that ties a man to the past, the present and the future... the past itself, ties the living community into another kind of world which is what some people call the world of ancestors (Uya, 1984:21)

This raises the issue of ancestral worship or the veneration of ancestors that has remained a very controversial aspect of African traditional religion. Certain writers have described the veneration of ancestors in African traditional religion as ancestor worship. Some have even used the term to describe African religion as a whole (Amadi, 232). The question of whether ancestor worship is the proper term for ancestor cult or whether the cult of the ancestors amount to African traditional religion is not the issue here. What is of interest is the fact that there is nothing inherently bad in venerating the ancestors, to borrow the words of Amadi, ‘in a worshipful manner if that be the meaning of ancestor worship’ (232). The protagonists of ancestral veneration believe that the ancestors are looked upon as spiritual beings who possess the power and prestige to influence the lives of members of the family almost in the same way as the divinities. Consequently, they need to be kept in proper harness for the good of the family; and this is done through sacrifices and devotion to them. This being the case, whether we say ancestor worship or ancestor cult, it significant to bear in mind that African religion is much more than the cult of ancestors.

The ancestors in Mbaise were referred to as Ndichie. Almost every home had a shrine where sacrifices and supplications were made to the ancestors. Sacrifices at the time usually consisted of food, drinks, and animals and were made on formal occasions such as when recommended by a diviner for a special purpose such as to appease the ancestors for anger caused them. Another important occasion of ‘worship’ at Ndichie shrine was during the annual ‘Ituaka’ and ‘Iriji’ festivals which will not be treated in detail in the present paper. Perhaps the most significant instance of veneration of ancestors lay in the daily informal remembrances of them during specific daily act. For illustration, when an elderly or titled person woke up in the morning he would normally perform the ‘*itu-mmnya*’ (pouring out the first draught of palm wine drink) as libation, and holding his *ofo* stick, prayed to the ancestors who were believed to cherished such communion with the living. The ancestors, according to an informant,

were (Ugochukwu, Oral Information). This may explain why at times, little food would first of all be thrown outside for the ancestors before commencement of eating during meals (Amadi, 235). These were some of the nitty-gritty of daily rituals that commemorated the revered status of Mbaise world-view.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has addressed the fundamental aspects of the traditional socio-cultural developments of a significant Igbo polity. Traditional institutions such as the family structure, marriage, and the religious practices did not only gave order and meaning to the pre-colonial Mbaise, but were also the linchpin upon which all socio-political and economic activities of the people revolved over time. Put differently, institutions like marriage and religion governed a significant part of the life. For example, traditional Mbaise practiced a religion in which the people ‘worshiped’ the various gods in a way or ways that accorded with their perception of the universe. To them, what mattered most was not so much the worship of an image but an attempt to preserve the lives of the people. In this direction, religion was seen as result oriented, hence, the belief in the ability of the gods to give immediate answer to life’s multifaceted problems. ‘They were not content to resign their fate to the caprices of the gods, preferring rather to command them to do their bidding’ (Amadi, 295). Magic as result, became an essential element of Mbaise traditional religion.

Though Christian cultures and western education greatly affected the utility of these cultural attributes in the life of the people, the article still concludes that many communities and individuals in Mbaise today have not completely jettisoned these practices abhorred or considered ‘bad’ by western colonialists and writers. For example, some people still offer sacrifices and prayers to the Almighty God through various intermediaries such as local deities and ancestors. The practice of pouring libation as a way of invoking the spirit of ancestors is still popular among Christian adherents not only in Mbaise but also in other communities in Igbo land. The emergence of western influences (Christianity and western education), before the beginning of the twentieth century was not robust enough to affect significantly, the fortunes of traditional values and practices in the areas that later became Mbaise. What we have today is the case of cultural eclecticism that created a new Mbaise society in which inter-cultural ‘marriage of convenience’ designed to ensure the dynamism of the area seems to have manifested.

REFERENCES

- Adner, E. ‘Interim Report of a Social and Economic Survey of Mbaise
Manuscript, 1952.
- Afigbo, A.E, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, Nsukka:
University Press Limited, 1981.
- Agulanna, E.C ‘Marriage in Mbaise: Past, Present and Future’ in Nwogu and Udunze
(eds.), *Nguru Mbaise: A Historical Perspective*, Owerri: Niran Publishers,
1999.

- Agulanna, E.C, *The Mbaiseness of Mbaise*, Owerri: I-O Publishers, 1998.
- Ajaebili, C.N, 'Socio-Economic and Cultural Developments in Akuma, Imo State', M.A Dissertation, University of Calabar, 2002.
- Akakwam, Cletus, about 80 years old, A popular opinion moulder, was interviewed at Nguru Mbaise twice in 2002.
- Amadi, R.I, 'A History of Nnewi to 1924', Ph.D Thesis, University of Calabar, 1982.
- Amadi, R.I, *Anaedo Nnewi: The Making of an Igbo Polity, 1500-1924*, Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 1999.
- Anosike, Alphonsus, about 90 years old, Rtd. Teacher interviewed at Nnarambia-Ahiara in 2000.
- Anyanwu, Mark, 90+, an enlightened Farmer/trader, interviewed at Nguru Mbaise in June, 2000.
- Basden, G.T, *Niger Ibos*, London: Frank Cass and Publishers Limited, 1968.
- Dibia, I.A, 80+, A well-known community leader, interviewed at Eziala Nguru, October 12, 2001.
- Dopemu, P.A and Awolalu, J.O, *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979.
- Ejekwumadu, J.I, 70+, A Rtd Teacher interviewed at Ahiara Mbaise in April, 2003.
- Ekechi, F.K, 'The Igbo Response to British Imperialism: The Episode of Dr Stewart and the Ahiara Expedition, 1905-1916', *Journal of African Studies*, 1 Summer, 1974.
- Ezeji Elders, Group Interview at Eke-Nguru, on the 3rd of July, 2003.
- Finley, D, *The Social Fabric*, London: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Fortes, M. *Marriage in Tribal Society*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Hammond, B.P (ed.), *Cultural and Social Anthropology: Selected Readings*, New York: The Macmillan Press, 1964.
- Idagu, E, 'Economic and Socio-Cultural Developments in Bekwarra Society, 1500-1945', M.A Dissertation, University of Calabar, 2003.
- Idowu, E.B, *African Traditional Religion*, London; Scotland Church Mission Press, 1973.
- Ilogu, E.C, *Christianity and Igbo Culture*, Enugu: Nok Publishers Limited, 1974.
- Inechi, Anthony, A community leader of note, aged about 90, was interviewed twice at Ezuhu Nguru Mbaise in 2001 and 2002.
- Maduagwu, et.al. (Eds.), *A Short History and Directory of Umuahia People*, Compiled by Umuahia Development Association, Lagos, 2013.
- Mbakwe, Joseph, Well known Trader/Farmer, aged about 80, was interviewed at Eziala- Nguru Mbaise, in 2000. He is a very knowledgeable person in the oral history of Nguru community.
- Mbakwe, P.U, 'A Traditional History of Mbaise and the Theories of Igbo, Origin' *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture*, Vol.9, No.1, March, 2007.
- Mbakwe, P.U, 'Continuity and Change in an Igbo Polity; A Socio- Economic History of Mbaise, Imo State, 1500-1950', Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Calabar, 2005.
- Meek, C.K, 'Report on the Social and Political Organization of Owerri, 1932-1938', File No.19981/CSE/85/5056, National Archive Enugu (NAE), 1932.
- Njoku, C.A.C, *History and Culture of Mbaise*, Aba: Celaju Press, 2003.
- Njoku, N.N, 'The Evolution of Mbaise as a Local Government Unit', B.A Special Project, Imo State University, Okigwe, 1985.

- Nwala, T.U, 'Igbo Traditional Religion as an Element of the Culture', *N.Y.S.C Colloquium*, Owerri, 1982.
- Nwala, T.U, *Mbaise in Contemporary Nigeria*, New York: Gold and Maestro Publishers, 1978.
- Ohanele, Christopher, about 80 years, Retired Headmaster, interviewed at Nguru Mbaise in January, 2000.
- Oriaku, Alexander, about 70 years, a popular village medicine dealer, was interviewed at Eke-Nguru Mbaise, in 2002.
- Parrinder, G.E, *African Traditional Religion*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1976.
- Smock, A.C, *Ibo Politics: The Role Ethnic Unions in Eastern Nigeria*, Howard: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Stockley, G, Intelligence Report on Nguru and Ekwerazu Clans', File No.EP8840A, MINLOC 6/1/175, NAE, 1931.
- Uchendu, V.C, *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria*, New York; Holt Rhinehart and Wilson Press, 1965.
- Uya, E.O, African History; 'Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives', Monograph Series 11, Cornell University, African Studies and Research Center, 1974.